

Dispersed Social Work: Understanding Social Presence and Organizational Identification



Through the Use of New Communication Technologies

Sharlene A. Allen, Ed.D. Candidate and Dr. Michael Marquardt (faculty advisor)

Executive Leadership Program in Human and Organization Learning, The George Washington University, Washington, DC

Abstract

As social and human service organizations continue to expand the range of service delivery to meet the complex demands of today's human service clientele, embracing the notion of dispersed work has become a significantly relevant option. With the notion of dispersed work, new communication technology (NCT) is proposed to become the medium for interacting. This study's purpose is to find out how dispersed social workers experience interactions through NCT as periods of social presence with centralized co-workers and supervisors. This study also seeks to find out how NCT facilitates increased organizational identification amongst dispersed social workers.

Background

Today social and human services organizations can have a centralized office and have a portion of its employees



dispersed throughout the city, state or world. At the same time for dispersed workers, there is a decrease in face to face presence which minimizes peer interaction, consultation with supervisors or just "water cooler" conversation. For the dispersed worker, interaction with co-workers and supervisors is reduced to communication via the use of new communication technology.

Although NCT is becoming prevalent in social work education (i.e. online education), there is inadequate attention in the areas of social work research and practice as compared to other organizations who view new technologies as it pertains to dispersed work, social presence and organizational identification.

So What?

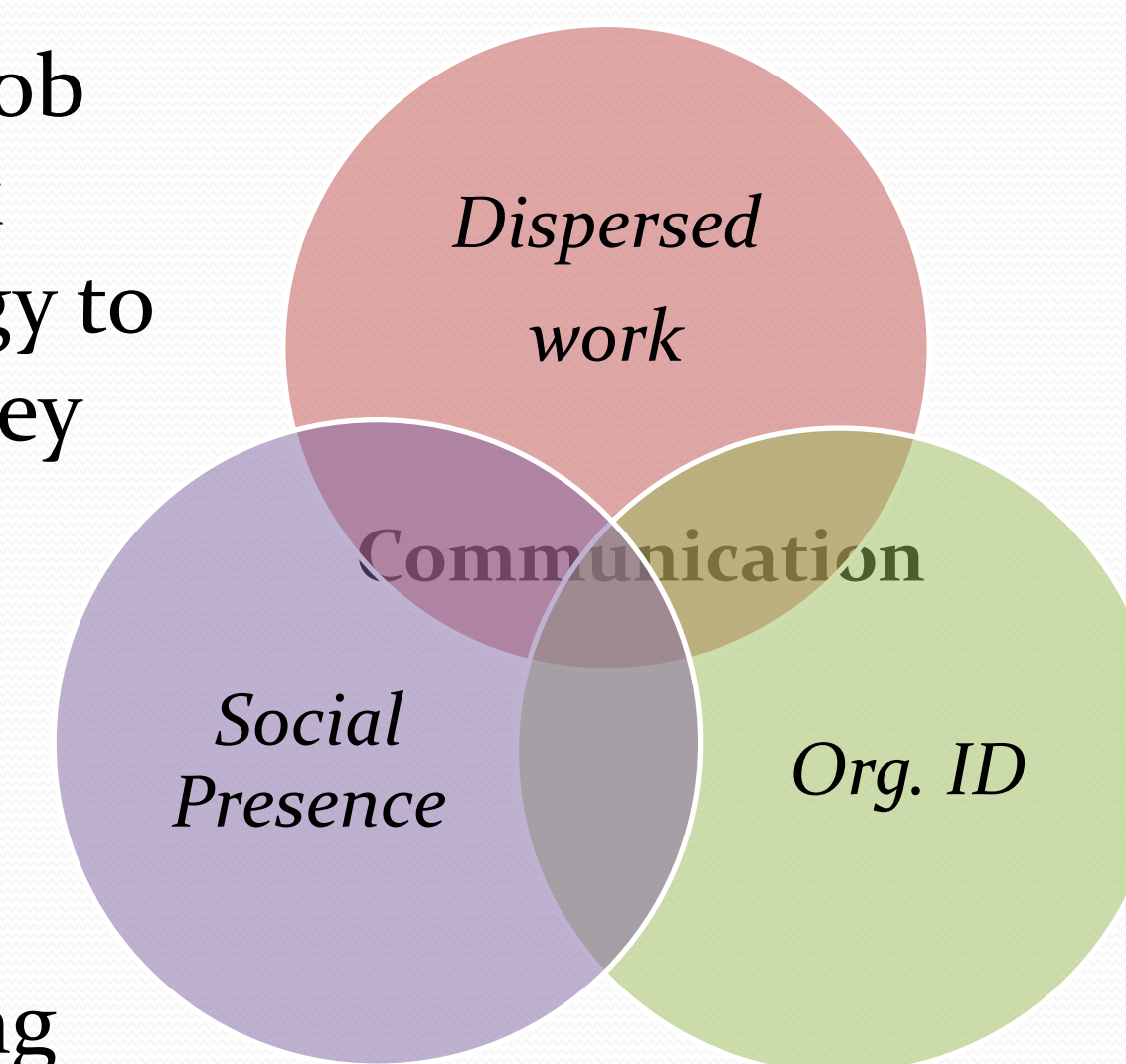
With NCT replacing face to face interaction for the dispersed worker, decreased face to face presence can potentially influence sense of connection to the organization. As it pertains to social work practice and research, there is a dearth in social work literature that focuses on the experiences of dispersed social workers, presence and the facilitation of organizational identification through the use of new communication technology.

Conceptual Framework

Dispersed work - an alternative work arrangement in which employees, for some or all of their work schedule, engage in job tasks that would normally be completed in a traditional work environment, primarily using new communication technology to interact with others inside and outside the organization (Bailey & Kurland, 2002).

Social Presence - "ability of a communication medium to allow a group member to feel the presence of the other group member and the feeling that the group is jointly involved in communicative interaction" (Andres 2002,p. 40).

Organizational Identification - A self-definitional process through which individuals relationally link themselves to the organization, coming to understand and influence the organizational logic through discourse, including the integration of organizational and personal goals and values (Parker & Haridakis,2008).



Significance

This study will fill the gap pertaining to social work research, practice, and policy in the areas of dispersed work and organizational identification. Focusing on this population can add voice to the experiences of dispersed social workers providing illumination to scholars and practitioners.



Direct outcomes of this study encompass increased understanding of how social presence, via the use of NCT, can facilitate increased organizational identification. Additionally, this study can provide insight into meeting the administrative challenges of managing dispersed employees as it relates to isolation, decreased communication, motivation, commitment, and other consequent behaviors.

Direct applications can include new systems to enhance the organizational identification of dispersed social workers within social and human service organizations.

From a broader perspective, social and human services organizations can become more aware of the need to create a culture that enhances support of dispersed employees.

Research Methods

Research Question

What is the dispersed social worker's experience of social presence as the facilitation of organizational identification via the use of NCT?

Sample

Semi-structured interviews of 10-16 dispersed social workers.

Inclusion criteria

6 months of experience as licensed social worker; engage in dispersed work at least 100% of the time; be employed with chosen human service site for at least 6 months.

Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed via a qualitative data analysis software program.

Moustakas' (1994) systematic method of data collection and analysis will allow a focus on a description of the experience as well as researcher interpretation culminating in the "essence" of the phenomenon.



Implications

Increased understanding of how social presence via the use of NCT can facilitate increased organizational identification.

Provide insight into meeting the administrative challenges of managing dispersed employees as it relates to isolation, decreased communication, motivation, commitment, and other consequent behaviors.

New systems to enhance the organizational identification of dispersed social workers within social and human service organizations.

Social and human services organizations can become more aware of the need to create a culture that enhances support of dispersed workers.

References

- Andres, H. (2002). A comparison of face-to-face and virtual software development teams. *Team Performance Management: An International Journal*, 8(1/2), 39-48.
- Bailey, D. E., & Kurland, N. B. (2002). A review of telework research: Finding new directions and lessons for the study of modern work. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23, 383-400.
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Parker, R., & Haridakis, P. (2008). Development of an organizational identification scale: Integrating cognitive and communicative conceptualizations. *Journal of Communication Studies*, 1(3/4), 105-126.
- Perron, B., Taylor, H., Glass, J., Margerum-Leys, J. (2010). Information and communication technologies in social work. *Advances in Social Work*, 11(1), 67-81.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Marquardt and the faculty and staff of the Executive Leadership Department of George Washington University for their endless support. Additional thanks to Ohio State University School of Social Work.

Further Information

Sharlene Allen, MSW,
LCSW-C,
Ivyshine27@gmail.com
443-529-6805